

Preparing the Way for Christmas – 2. God is Gracious

Luke 1:57-64, 67, 76-79

December 10, 2023

Pastor Tami Luckhardt

Today, we continue in our sermon series, Preparing the Way for Christmas as we continue to look at the life of John the Baptist. You may recall that John's mother was Elizabeth, a relative of Mary's, most likely Mary's aunt. So that makes John a cousin to Jesus, born about 6 months before Jesus. And John's purpose in life was to prepare the way for the Lord, preparing the people for the message Jesus would bring. And so, during the Advent season, as we remember the first coming of Christ and we also prepare to welcome Christ anew into our hearts this Christmas. So, let us continue today to prepare our hearts as we turn to the story of John the Baptist.

Last week as our story began, we met Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. They were an older couple who, even though they had prayed and prayed, had never been able to have children. And now, by all accounts, Elizabeth was way past childbearing age. Zechariah served his whole life as a temple priest. Once in a lifetime, the temple priests were given the honor of going into the inner temple to offer a sacrifice of incense to God. So, this was Zechariah's day. And when he went inside this space, called the Holy of Holies, where there should be no one else but instead, he sees another man standing there. There should have been nobody else in there. But there was something special about the man that indicated to Zechariah that he was an angel. We are not told what that special quality he possessed but it was somehow glorious about him.

And the angel said to Zechariah what we hear most angels say when they first show up on the scene. "Don't be afraid." I don't think I've ever seen an angel, but I am guessing they must be kind of scary since they always start out by saying, "Don't be afraid!"

But Gabriel goes on to tell Zechariah that God has heard his and Elizabeth's prayers for a child and now was the time for Elizabeth to bear a son. They are to call him John and he is going to prepare the way for the Messiah. At that moment, the first words that Zechariah speaks are, "How can I be sure of this?" Luke 1:18

What kind of response is that? The angel of the Lord came in a glorious way to give him the best news of his life and all he you say, how can I be sure? Gabriel replies:

"I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen." Luke 1:19-20.

Zechariah's first response is, I just can't believe this. I want to believe it, but I just can't. And so, as we think about this part of the story we think about the role of doubt in our lives.

Here's a man who was an older priest. We are told that he loved God, trusted in God, was righteous and blameless in every way and still... he doubted God. So, as I think about this and our desire to be sure of things. It would have been one thing if he said to the angel, tell me how this is going to happen but instead, he asked, how can I be sure of this? How can we be sure of anything really when you think about doubt.

DOUBT

In 1989, Jerry and I were back living in his hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Jerry was teaching music in a nearby high school, and I was directing children's choirs at First United Methodist of Ann Arbor. Our son, Mark was 3 and I was pregnant with our second child, due in February. Late that summer, Jerry got a phone call offering him his dream job-directing the University of Michigan Marching Band, his beloved alma mater. It was a one-year position while they did a nationwide search. Jerry had marched in the band for four years and served a graduate assistant with the band for two years. He knew this job inside and out. And so, he jumped at the chance. He worked harder than he had ever worked, and it was a successful year. Of course, he applied for the permanent position and was one of five finalists, but in February, he was notified that he was not selected for the job.

So, he began applying for other college marching band positions. He was successful in his applying and over the course of a few months, had three interviews and three job offers. But with each offer, after a lot of prayer and conversation, he turned them down one by one. We just felt like they were not the right fit for Jerry's career path or for our young family. We had faith that a better fit would come along. And so, we waited, and we waited. All along, we wondered if we were making the right decision. In the end, we just had to trust. Finally, in June, Jerry interviewed for a position with the University of Texas Longhorn Band. And in August, we moved our little family of four to Austin, Texas. It worked out for us. But sometimes it doesn't and when that happens, you do the best you can and make course corrections. There is nothing wrong with that. It happens all the time.

Think about similar situations in your life, your career, your marriage, where you're going to go to college? Do you invest in the stock market? If you do, how can you be sure you're going to make money? You can't, right? If someone tells you they have a sure thing, you better run the other way because we all know, there are no sure things. So, in every decision, you do your homework, you discuss it with trusted family, friends and colleagues, you pray about it, and then you say, okay, this seems to make the most sense and you take a leap of faith.

We are all going to have questions about almost everything in life, including our faith. I love this quote from Frederick Buechner, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is not the enemy of faith. Doubt is your brain asking questions about things you cannot see, feel, or touch. Doubt does not mean you are a bad person. It does not upset God that you have questions. That is just a part of being human. What matters is what you do with your doubts.

I think of the man who came to Jesus and asked him if he was willing to heal his son. To which Jesus replied, of course I'm willing. All things are possible for those who have faith. And the man said, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. How can you be sure? You can't. At some point, you just need to decide based on all the facts you have and then trust. In fact, in January our sermon series will be about wrestling with doubt... because everyone has doubts. We ask questions like, "Does God really exist? Is the Bible true? Is there a heaven?" I believe that questions and doubt are the path to a deeper faith. So come January, I invite you to join us as we wrestle with doubt together.

SILENCE

Okay, back to our story. Gabriel tells Zechariah that because he didn't trust and wanted certainty, he would not be able to speak for the next 9 months. Can you imagine? At the time when he had the best news of his life to share, he couldn't speak. I think this was God's way of saying Zechariah, sometimes you talk too much. You need to listen more.

Have you ever said something and that you wished almost instantly that you could take it back? Or while someone is speaking, do you find yourself thinking about what you are going to say in response, rather than listening? God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. James puts it this way, we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. I think God gave Zechariah 9 months of silence so he would be forced to actually listen more to what was going on around him. We see this same thing throughout scripture. Psalm 46:10, *be still and know that I am God.* Habakkuk 2:20 says, *the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before him.* Sometimes God is saying to us, just be silent and listen.

Right after Thanksgiving this year, I took three days and went to a retreat center for my own personal, silent retreat. Once I got there, I realized I was the only guest there, so I had a private chef and tons of space and silence. I used the time to take long walks in the woods, study scripture, do some sermon planning for this sermon. The fact that I was on a silent retreat and writing about silence was not lost on me. I also wrote a paper for a course I took this past year defining my goals for my next years of ministry. Over the three days, I settled into the silence and got quiet. And I found clarity and I heard God speak to me. I wonder if you can find a little more silence in your life, talk less, and listen more, especially in the busy, bustling season.

The hymn, *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*, is the oldest of our hymns. It was originally composed in 275. Listen carefully to the words describing the incarnation, coming to us in the babe in Bethlehem. The hymn calls us to this response:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand.
Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.

So when the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John."

They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him. I think this is rather funny. Gesturing? Zechariah wasn't deaf. He couldn't speak so I am not sure why they felt they needed to gesture to him. After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God. Luke 1:57-64

And the moment he fulfilled what Gabriel had told him, he was able to speak again and could not help but praise god.

GOD IS GRACIOUS

In the first century, it was the father's privilege and responsibility to name his children. I think it's interesting to note here that the angel Gabriel gave both John and Jesus their names. He told Zechariah to call his child Johanan/John, which means, *God is gracious*. And then he said to Mary, you are to name this child Jesuah/Jesus, which means, *the lord saves* because this child will be the savior of all people. So now we can see why John was named *God is gracious*. He was sent by God because of God's grace, to prepare the way for the Lord inviting people to repent, to return to God and one another, because God is gracious and merciful.

The word, *gracious* in Greek translates to kindness, favor, undeserved blessings that are extended to one another simply due to the goodness of the giver, not because the recipient deserves it. It is what you embody when you help a stranger. It is particularly evident when you help someone who has hurt you. Our God is gracious, and we are called to do the same. Grace is the unmerited love of God, given solely because of God's goodness. This word is used over 150 times in the New Testament. Over and over again, it is one of the defining characteristics of God. God is gracious. And John came to show that by his life, by his message, and by his ministry. It was all about grace.

The fact that we live on a planet that supports life, a planet that has water and light and oxygen, this perfect little, inhabitable space. That is a gift! The fact that you are alive, that there is air to breathe and sun to warm our planet— it's not because God looked at human beings and said, they are so good, they deserve something really great. It's the other way around. God gave us something really great solely because God loves us. I think some folks think God operates like Santa Claus. If you're nice you're going to receive something good and if you're naughty, you're going to receive something bad. But scripture tells us that God causes it to rain upon the good and the evil at the same time. This is the nature of God. Good and merciful. Slow to anger.

This is especially important to remember at those times when we think we need to earn God's favor. If I only try hard enough, God will love me. If I read the Bible long enough, God will love me. When all along God has been saying, Child, I've loved you all along. Don't you know that by now? That is what Jesus demonstrated on the cross. This is why John came to prepare the way, calling people to repent. Because God is gracious and merciful and no matter what you've done in the past, no matter how messed up your life has been, God loves you. The Apostle Paul put it this way, Ephesians 2:8-10 *You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.*

Sometimes we get this mixed up and we put verse eight before verse nine and say if I do enough good works, then God will finally love me. But that's not how it goes. Instead, for it is by grace you have been saved. And in response to that grace, you are called to live a life of grace towards other people, to show kindness when they don't deserve it. This is meant to be our way of life.

What will be said about you at the end of your life? What will your children, friends or pastors say? Will you have taken enough time to be silent and listen? Will your life be defined by kindness and mercy shown to others even when they don't deserve it. Did your head and heart and hands connect? Did you make it a habit to share the gracious love of God? If so, people will celebrate who you became as you sought to live as a person of grace.

Let's pray. O God, how grateful we are for this wonderful story and what it teaches us today. Help us, O Lord, in our doubts, to dig deeper in order to find a deeper faith. Help us to be silent more. To listen more. To hear your voice in the silence. We pray o lord that our head and our hearts and our hands might connect so that our lives might be defined by your grace. In your holy name, amen.

Grow, Pray Study for the Week of December 10, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth, thou art, dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart. Amen.

Monday, December 11

Scripture: Luke 1:46-50

Mary said,

“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored
because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God.

Observation

Last week, we read Elizabeth's greeting when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came to visit her (Luke 1:39- 45). In Mary and Elizabeth's culture, women were second-class citizens. But Mary responded to Elizabeth with a poetic expression of praise that said God had “looked with favor on the low status of his servant.” They were both living examples of that. God valued who they really were, no matter what their status in human society!

Application

Elizabeth and Mary rejoiced that God had blessed them. But that did not mean what we often think. It was a blessing of purpose, of participation in what God was doing in the world. Her blessing brought hardship, confusion, and grief, but it was still a blessing. Have you ever received a blessing that included hardship, confusion, or grief? Are you willing to receive that kind of blessing?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, when I ask you to bless me or those I love, I realize that I usually want you to make our immediate lives easier. Teach me how to keep my mind and heart open to your more challenging blessings. Amen.

Tuesday, December 12

Scripture: Luke 1:51-56

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,

just as he promised to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."
Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.

Observation

The second part of Mary's song showed that the effects of John's and Jesus' births went far beyond a couple of happy rural families. Many of us fail to realize how subversive, even revolutionary, Mary's song really was. Mary's words should make us uncomfortable. They point to a concern God has for the poor, and a sense that the rich have received theirs already. We have the obligation and calling to be used by God to 'fill the hungry with good things.

Application

In what ways are you rich or powerful? In what ways "lowly" or "hungry"? Are you willing to seek and accept help in any areas where your life may be "lowly"? Do any parts of Mary's song make you uncomfortable enough to actively use the ways you are rich and/or powerful to lift the burdens of those who are lowly and hungry, and not just to further enhance your own wealth and power?

Prayer

Lord God, I don't want you to have to pull me down or send me away empty-handed. Give me the wisdom to share what I have, not to hoard it just for myself. Amen.

Wednesday, December 13

Scripture: Luke 1:57-64

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John." They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him. After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.

Observation

Remember that Zechariah couldn't speak because he had seriously doubted the angel's word that he and Elizabeth would have a son (Luke 1:5-20). However understandable we may find his skepticism, what God's messenger told him all came true. When Zechariah wrote that they would name the baby John, as the angel instructed, he was able to speak again.

Application

Zechariah obeyed God and gave up the highly prized privilege (see verse 61) of naming his son after himself. John's call was not to follow his father as a priest but to challenge those religious leaders. When grown, John's ministry pointed to someone greater, not to his own virtues or strengths. How did his father's surrender to God point the way for John's life mission? What inner qualities did Zechariah and John need to live out God's call without resentment or bitterness? How can you nurture those qualities in your life?

Prayer

King Jesus, Zechariah, and his son John focused on bringing praise and glory to you, not themselves. Keep developing the same spirit in me. Amen.

Thursday, December 14

Scripture: Luke 1:65-66

All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, "What then will this child be?" Indeed, the Lord's power was with him.

Observation

Luke said, "everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened." Today we might say there was "a lot of buzz" about John's birth. The aged priest struck dumb after offering incense at the Temple, the visibly pregnant woman all the neighbors knew couldn't have children—in a relatively small town, those things would attract a lot of attention. Then the baby was born, and as soon as the father and mother agreed on a surprising name, Zechariah could speak again! Of course, people talked.

Application

Those who hear are interested but still have questions about what it means. This is a pattern in Luke (Luke 3:15, 4:22, 5:26), who distinguishes being amazed from having faith. Faith is about "what it means," not just about whether something or someone is amazing. What helped you move from "Jesus is amazing" to having faith in what Jesus' life, death and resurrection mean for your life and the life of the world you live in?

Prayer

Lord God, thank you for sending John to prepare the way for Jesus. This Advent, help me to recognize ways I, too, can draw others to know and worship Jesus. Amen.

Friday, December 15

Scripture: Luke 1:67-75

John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,
"Bless the Lord God of Israel

because he has come to help and has delivered his people.

He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house,
just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.

He has brought salvation from our enemies
and from the power of all those who hate us.

He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and remembered his holy covenant,
the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham.

He has granted that we would be rescued
from the power of our enemies
so that we could serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes,
for as long as we live.

Observation

When we read Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), we noted that her song was not about her personal hopes or wishes, but about what God was doing through the child she would bear. When John the Baptist was born, his father Zechariah's praise was similar. He began by praising not his own son, but the child Mary would bear. He declared that God "has raised up a

mighty savior for us in his servant David's house.... He has brought salvation...he has shown mercy."

Application

Like all Jews in that day, Zechariah lived under Roman occupation. In verse 71 he said God "has brought salvation from our enemies." But scholar N. T. Wright noted that there was more than that in his words: "Zechariah's vision goes beyond simply a realigning of political powers. God's mercy, the forgiveness of sins, the rescue from death itself; all of this points to a deeper and wider meaning of 'salvation'." How did John and Jesus deliver all humans from "our enemies" in ways a merely political revolution could not?

Prayer

God of peace, there is so much awful stuff in our world that deeply troubles my heart. Let my peace and trust in your promises energize me to do my part in your work of setting this broken world to rights. Amen.

Saturday, December 16

Scripture: Luke 1:76-80

You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.
You will tell his people how to be saved
through the forgiveness of their sins.
Because of our God's deep compassion,
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,
to give light to those who are sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide us on the path of peace."

The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

Observation

Images of light and darkness occur over and over in the Advent songs and stories. Zechariah's words reflected not just fatherly pride, but divine insight. The angel Gabriel had said John would "turn many people in Israel back to their God...herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah ...kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics...get the people ready for God" (Luke 1:17, *The Message*). When John was born, Zechariah said that he would share the good news that "The dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness."

Application

We read earlier this week that when people in the Judean hill country heard of the events around John's birth, they asked, "What will this child turn out to be?" His father Zechariah had a strong sense of his son's mission, as verse 76 showed. Who played John's role in your life—who prepared the way for your faith, and introduced you to Jesus? In what ways has Jesus dispelled darkness by bringing light into your life? Are you willing to trust Jesus to touch wounded parts of your life that still need the healing that comes as "the dawn from heaven" keeps breaking into our hurting hearts?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you were, and are, the dawn from heaven, the light in the darkness that my life needs. Open my eyes to take in and rejoice in the continual dawning of your light. Amen.